

What was Modernism (in Indian Art)?

The life and works of Ramkinkar Baij narrate another dimension of the story of the history of modernism in India. It is due to the fact that his works have pursued a deliberate revolt against the antinomies of mainstream/national modernism. The modernism in Indian art deserves a question that starts with a '*what*' more than a '*when*'. The craving for a beginning may not help us to tackle the complexities of this historical matrix. The big *what* in the history of modernism tell us the history of vertical appropriations and the institutionalized character of hierarchization. This history unfolds the ways through which the cultural elite in India have appropriated the material and cultural production of the subalterns while denying both subaltern's contributions and elite's own history of appropriation, thus reinforcing their own sense of self and glorifying their own cultural violence. I would argue in this section that against the master narratives of modernism Ramkinkar has tactically deployed a minor linguistic idiom which has written the first 'counter-history' of mainstream modernism and paved the way for many modernisms in Indian art. Ramkinkar's importance lies in the fact that his images and vision subtly confront with the needs of the historical forces, what he may have sought to oppose. The significance of Ramkinkar's diversion from other early modernists' engagement with the culture of modernization is not that it embodies some kind of messianic truth, to which we may adhere. But his 'counter-history' of Indian national modernism and in turn the cultural politics of modernization itself, allows us to re-historicize the period it takes shape in. Purely in an oppositional way Ramkinkar therefore allows us to read that time historically against all kinds of domination in relation to the history of modernization, nationalism, and cultural and romantic imperialisms.¹

In order to explore the way through which Ramkinkar has disrupted the course of mainstream modernism, it is more than necessary to deal with the trajectories of his cultural production and the discursive ambit in which these trajectories of production are located. To begin with, I initiate a comparative analysis of the works and life of Deviprosad Roy Chowdhury (1899–1975) and Ramkinkar Baij (1906 - 1980). Many writers have commented on the works and life of both of them and a few of them are marked the formal dissimilarities between them. One of the most recent comparative analyses is made by Partha Mitter in his book *Triumph of Modernism*.² The introduction Mitter has provided to the work and life of D.P. Roy Chowdhury and Ramkinkar Baij in this book is indicative of the way canonical art history projects these artists. Mitter states:

Deviprosad Roy Chowdhury (1899–1975), widely regarded as the most important sculptor of late colonial India, was the scion of a Bengali *zamindari* family of Punjabi extraction. Controversialist, imperious, proud of his good looks, intelligence, noble descent and physical prowess, with an innate sense of his own genius, Deviprosad cut a larger than life figure. [p.168]

¹ Saree Makdisi, *Romantic Imperialism: Universal Empire and the Culture of Modernity*, Cambridge University Press, U.K. 1998.

² Partha Mitter, *Triumph of Modernism: India's Art and the Avant-Garde – 1922-47*, Reaktion Book Ltd., London, 2007.

Contrary to this iconic figuration, Ramkinker is described as:

In him the discourse of primitivism and personal commitment fused. Temperamentally unconventional, he enjoyed the company of the Santals, who took him to their heart. [p.96]

Mitter's description of Ramkinker as a modernist primitivist is nothing but an exemplifier of the way in which he attempts to position Ramkinker in the pantheon of mainstream modernists. This attempt to position Ramkinker in the pantheon of modernist primitivists is predicated upon the legacy of Santhiniketan. The life and body of Santals were the ideal subject matter of pictorial representation for most of the artists belongs to Santiniketan. Mitter positions Ramkinker in this pantheon along with the works of Nandalal Bose and Benod Bihari and states that "with Ramkinkar the myth of the happy, innocent Santals attained its apotheosis."³

I would argue in this context that contrary to Mitter's claims of apotheosis; we can find in the works of Ramkinker an antithesis of the primitivist discourses around the Santals. Further, this study would attempt to illustrate the ideological character of the primitivist discourse and its centrality in the construction of nationalist history of modernism. The appearance of Santal life and body as a predominant representational trope in most of the artists belong to 'Bengal School' has to be located within the culturalist framework of the nationalist modern and its processes of culturalization of tribal life.

Deviprosad and Ramkinker: Conflicting Strategies of Representational politics

D.P. Roy Chaudhary is well known for his monumental works which has "celebrated the trials and triumphs of the labouring man". Comparing him and Ramkinker, Partha Mitter has made the following observation:

The question is: if his work expressed sympathy for the salt of the earth, what then was his difference from Ramkinkar and the primitivists? Indeed, Deviprosad's heroic vision of the toiling masses had many similarities with that of the primitivists but the differences were significant. The primitivist idealization of the innocent Santals as the denizens of an *unchanging community* was essentially a critique of global capitalism, urban modernity and Enlightenment notions of progress. On the other hand, Deviprosad's sources were an uneasy mix: he drew nourishment more from nineteenth-century Romantic notions of struggling humanity than from a 'primitivist' avant-garde critique of modernity. [Emphasis added. P. 171]

If we analyze one of the Deviprosad's most famous works *Triumph of Labor* along with Ramkinkers *Mill Call* the pit falls of Mitter's argument would reveal to us. In the *Triumph of Labor*, through the language of 'romantic realism' Deviprosad has

³Ibid, p.98

attempted to represent the universal labourhood. It can be read as a creative salute to the laboring bodies of the modern mass. It also represents the recognition of the role of working class in the construction of India as a modern nation. The working class bodies in this sculptural group symbolize the heroic role they have played in the construction of the modern nation state. These bodies are devoid of any form of localism and not bound to any specific location or space. In that sense, the 'romantic/idealistic realism' of Deviprosad extracts the specificities of the bodies, like region, religion, caste, ethnicity etc., and replace them with an abstract conception of working class body. This sculptural group becomes the emblem of Indian modernity because of this abstraction. This is the same reason behind *Triumph of Labor* becomes the ideal sculptural representation for the nation-state which was attempting to forge multiple identities into a homogenous unity.

While heroism of the toiling masses becomes the hallmark of D.P Roy Choudhari's works, Ramkinker's figures do not share this logic. Instead, they represent the everyday realities of the working class which is entangled in multiple forms of identities along with the question of class. The question of ethnicity, caste, gender etc. becomes too central in Ramkinker's discourse and the traces of a critical element of the local are always present in his representation. The Santals in Ramkinker's *Mill Call* is not the primitive ideal or the 'unchanging community' of Mitter. Here, Ramkinker looks at modernity from a subaltern's point of view. In a general sense, modernity here appears as an emancipatory discourse and a historically available option for subalterns to break away from the oppressive machinery of traditional social system. The 'mill call', as many scholars have already pointed out, symbolizes the modern order of time. The movement and vibrant rhythm which is present in this sculptural representation of santal is not a testimony of their primitive energy but on the contrary a move away from the primitivist discourse of nationalist intelligentsia.

The manners in which various historians and writers describe Ramkinker themselves are testimonies of their preconceived notions about the subaltern. In most of the writings he appears as an anarchic, intuitive and a possessed individual. Partha Mitter's statements like, "In him the discourse of primitivism and personal commitment fused. Temperamentally unconventional, he enjoyed the company of the Santals, who took him to their heart" is an indicator of this process. One of the startling examples of this mode of constructing the image of Ramkinker would be a conversation between two veterans of Indian art, K.G.Subramanyan and R.Sivakumar. K.G.Subramanyan observes: "I remember reading James Joyce's *Ulysses* to him [Ramkinkar Baij] those days, parts of which were hard enough for even resourceful linguists to unravel, and found to my astonishment that he could readily read the images and their nuances, which escaped most learned professors! This brought home to me that there are certain unusual minds that respond *instinctively* to a cultural climate – like some *animals* that read with their body atmospheric and seismic changes." [Emphasis added].⁴ What are the possible implications of K.G.Subramanyan's highly appreciative statement about the 'instinctive' 'cultural animal' Ramkinkar Baij. This statement in a subtle manner denies Ramkinkar's intellectual alertness to a cultural ambience through the tropes of animalization and

⁴ *Remembering Ramkinkar: K.G.Subramanyan Interviewed by R.Sivakumar*, Art Heritage 9, 1989-90, Art Heritage, Triveni Kala Sangam, New Delhi 1990. p.66.

instinctiveness. The crucial question here is that why, whenever referring to Ramkinkar Baij, is the polarity of man/animal, cultured/anarchic, literate/illiterate etc repeatedly evoked in various writings? What is the cultural politics behind this denial of subjecthood and intellectual engagement to Ramkinkar and his works? What is the secret behind the recurring and spectral evocation of Ramkinkar's class/caste identity without any ideological specificity and any politics of difference in engagements? I think this is one of the ways in which institutions try to appropriate Ramkinkar in the pantheon of the formalist (read nationalist) modernists. Through the production of binary logics or through the recurring evocation of them what precisely institutions intend to do is to dilute or disorient Ramkinkar's marking of his differences⁵ and in turn make it as a space that is wholeheartedly allotted by the institution itself. The struggle behind the marking is undermined and instead of that is introduced a pseudo-democratic space that is open to all (equal opportunity for all!).⁶ Here the re-evocation of instinctiveness works as an armour that protects the urban intelligentsia from the ideological challenges Ramkinkar had made against their claims about modernism in general and modernist art in particular.

Mill Call and Santal Family

First of all, the location of these sculptures deserves a critical attention. *Santal Family* and *Mill Call*, both of these open air sculptures are located in the premise of Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan University. The land of this university was a Santal habitat before it was acquired by the Tagore family in order to establish an educational institution. But this educational institution was not imagined as an institution for the Santal community. On the contrary, Santals remained as a marginal presence and absence in this imagination. The presence of Santals is defined by the symbolic economy of primitive ambience of the place while physical absence of them had constituted its materiality. Or in other words, the idea of Santal and the subject Santal always remained as the part and not-part of the system. By representing a moving tribal family in monumental size and volume, Ramkinkar reasserts this history of dislocation on the one hand and their real presence on the other. The crucial point here is that, the symbolic presence of the Santal never conceptualized as a 'Santal other' who possesses the innocence of nature. Ramkinkar takes Santals away from the symbolic economy of equating them with nature

⁵ For example take R.Sivakumar's statement about two of Ramkinkar's works titled 'Golden Crop' and 'Santhal Family': "these images being more rooted in reality, their romanticism is more nuance and subsume to the representation of the life vitality and its small pleasures. Santhal life as a subject matter had antecedents in the work of both Nandalal Bose and Binode Bihari however there was a *marked difference* in Ramkinkar's approach." (Emphasis added). But he evades the question that what constitutes this marked difference. See R.Sivakumar, *Santiniketan: The Making of Contextual Modernism*, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, 1997, (page numbers are not given).

⁶ Another example of this process would be the soothing linear narrative of Partha Mitter. He writes "Of humble origins, Ramkinkar (1906–1980) began under Nandalal in the 1920s, initially as a painter; on discovering his unusual modelling talents Nandalal transferred him to the sculpture class. From the outset, Ramkinkar showed a keen interest in the European avant-garde, an interest actively fostered by Nandalal, despite his own suspicions about modernist painting. Ramkinkar took lessons from visiting sculptors, while Kramrisch opened up the world of Western modernism to him. The leading sculptor, Deviprosad Roy Chowdhury, who taught for a while in Santiniketan, recommended Edouard Lanteri's *Modelling: A Guide for Teachers and Students* to him." This form of narration creates an impression of a conflict free discursive zone on the one hand an ideologically neutral and disinterested institutional space on the other.

and through the act of historicizing and contemporarizing their existence reveals the political ramification of this cultural othering.

In the colonial, nationalist and regional discourses the tribals are always portrayed as unthinking beings. Prathama Bannerjee observes that it is due to the typical characterization that “being ‘primitive’, a ‘tribe’ was necessarily body-centric, unthinking, extravagant, even violent.” While the colonizer used this typical characterization for the purpose of portraying tribals as inherently violent and their rebellions against them as irrational, the nationalist elite has projected it as evidences of premordiality of the ‘primitives’. Prathama Banerjee’s observations further clarify this paradigmatic phenomenon.⁷ She observes:

Nationalism as political paradigm, with its inherent historicism, would then develop a relationship of desire with the adivasi, seeking to modernize, hinduise and nationalize the ‘tribe’ on the one hand, but on the other hand, to retain the so-called ‘primordiality’ that allowed reckless and intractable resistance to the universalizing ‘modern’. [pp.126]

However, it would be significant if we look little closer into the historical role Santals has played as political subjects in colonial India along with the history of the cultural representation of them in Bengali literature and art. To explore this complex process some of the crucial observations I draw from the studies of Prathama Banerjee. She explores the process of culturalisation of adivasi (in this context Santals) and argues that culturisation is the way through which political and historical agency of adivasi is pushed outside the ambit of history. She states:

... Indian historical and political discourses explain the so-called ‘primitive’s’ political alterity through what can be called a ‘culturisation’ of the ‘tribe’ – with grave implications not only for adivasi politics but for Indian politics in general. In our contemporary common sense, the political intractability of the adivasi appears primarily as her cultural habit. Politics thus is explained as culture. The implication is clear: if labeling something as political is to impute to it a conscious agency and contingent positioning, to gloss it over as cultural immediately erases this aspect of self-consciousness. Culture, after all, is posed as a matter of habit, tradition, which does not necessarily assume the kind of purposive and self-reflexive intent that a political act presumes. Not accidentally, therefore, parallel to the textualisation of the ‘tribe’ as a perpetually insurgent being in India, has been the textualisation of the ‘tribe’, the ‘ethnos’, as above and beyond all, an alternative culture. (p.131)

Prathama Banerjee also observes that Bengali literary texts portray santals as “essentially valorous and rebellious beings, subjects of the colonized Bengali’s desire.” (p.126-7) But unlike the literary representations, in the works of the artists associated

⁷ Prathama Banerjee, “Culture/Politics: the curious Double-bind of the Indian Adivasi”, in *Subaltern Citizens and Their Histories*, Gyanendra Pandey (ed.), Routledge, London and New York, 2010.

with the Bengal School, Santals always appeared as the epitome of nature, innocence and beauty. More than the valour and vigour, what caught the attention of most of these artists is the 'primordial' beauty of the Santal bodies. The sensuous body of the Santal women became a repeated representative motif in many of the work. Other thematic around Santal life was their cultural festivals like dance and day to day activities like forest gatherings or their dwelling places. There are hardly any references to Santal insurgence or representations of them as warriors. Santal life more or less remained as an object of curiosity, marker of an alternate culture, the bourgeois desire about the bodies of the other and a nationalist metaphor of the representatives of the India's pristine and uncontaminated culture. These artists, along with the depiction of the flora and fauna constructed an imagery Santal life where nature itself represents the culture. This act of acknowledging culture by naturalizing it is the mechanism through which the nationalist intelligentsia had acquired their cultural agency and legitimacy. Or in other words, naturalization of culture is an essential component of the culturisation of the tribal subjects and their life. The appearance of Santal with the overarching presence of universal notion of nature and tribal habitat, devoid of the arbitrary character of local is the conceptual terrain of this culturisation. In this terrain, Santals can exist only as floating signifiers where traces of their political agency and the concreteness of their real life experiences have to be erased. Then only the arbitrary character of the locale can be transmuted into the space of culture through which the nation can reappear as the location of history.

This seeming difference between the verbal and visual representations of Santals seeks further elaboration. I would argue in this context that this difference is a constitutive one than a disparity. They are the double side of a singular process often presents itself as contradictory in character. Or in other words, both of these instances illustrate two modes of naturalization. In the literary representation, the political agency of the Santal is translated as the outburst of their primordial energy. They are represented as irrational, but this irrationality is defined as the manifestation of nature's power through the human medium. Santal appears here as the heirs of an intuitive reasoning that readily responds to the call of the mother-nation. In the visual representation, instead of the heroic and the virulent character of Santals, they appear more as floating signifiers: signifiers of nature's beauty, innocence, simplicity, joy and care and the reservoirs of nation's uncontaminated culture. The visual representations of santals are a fusion of nature, culture and the nation. This fusion had legitimized the nationalist intelligentsia's efforts to convert them from representing subjects to representable objects.

In this context, another mode of representation of the 'tribal' subject deserves a critical attention – a mythicized/Hinduized mode. Nandalal Bose's series of painting on the mythical character Sabari is a case in point here. In the epic Ramayana Sabari appears as an ardent devotee of the lord Ram. She is characterized as an ignorant and innocent tribal woman who is waiting endlessly for the Ram's darshan in this epic. In the epic narrative, while meeting with Ram, Sabari has offered the fruits she has gathered from the forest to him. In order to make sure that the fruits she has offered to the lord is the best ones, she bites and taste them beforehand. Even though this act makes the fruits 'impure', lord Rama has happily accepted her offering and pleased with her true devotion

and innocence. Nandalal Bose repeatedly painted the images of Sabari from this small episode from Ramayana. In 1941, he had made a series of images of Sabari. Interestingly, three images of Sabari by Nandalal Bose represent three stages of her life: *Sabari in Her Youth*, *Sabari in Her Middle Age* and *Sabari in Her Old Age*. All three paintings depict some act of fruit gathering. The young Sabari is portrayed as collecting the fruits from a tall tree; she is standing in one of the branches of the tree. Middle aged Sabari sitting in a mat and checking the quality of the fruits. The background of the painting has references to contemporary tribal habitat. Sabari in her old age is represented as gathering fruits from a small tree.

Each figure is clearly marked by their age through bodily features. This emphasis on age has wide ranging connotations. On the one hand, representation of Sabari in different stages of her life produces a matrix of actuality to this mythic event/character and on the other hand they also illustrate the unchanging 'nature' of Sabari through depicting her always in the act of fruit gathering. This actuality further amplified through the evocation of contemporary tribal habitat. The re-evocation of the mythic character (from a small episode of the epic) is aimed at producing a historical validity to the nationalist attempt to hinduise them. In that sense, the mythification of tribal is an attempt to produce an unchanging mythological past in order to mark them outside the ambit of history.

Nandalal's works are meant to provide a sense of timelessness whereas the whole notion of "age" is actually supposed to be fixed and indicative of a point in time and a point in history, and when three "ages" are normatively supposed to represent stages of development of an individual/community/nation (be they biological or cultural or economic or otherwise), she is still gathering, and by that, if one follows the logic of stages of development, she will continue to gather. She is still unchanged, and old, as old and unchanged as the Ramayana itself (or as pure and untainted as the Ramayana itself). He romantically sees this event as proof of some kind of "loyal subjects" right from mythological time till date and nor does he expect or think that their position warrants any change. The nationalist construction of tribals as the epitome of innocence (and thereby ignorance) readily correspond and corroborate with the image of the mythic Sabari. If we compare this mythic representation of Nandalal Bose with the accounts of Leonard K Elmhurst⁸ in his diary entry January 23, 1922, then the ideological underpinning of the nationalist attempt of mythification/hinduization becomes clearer. Leonard K Elmhurst has observed that:

The Santals were originally forest and jungle dwellers and hunters rather than cultivators. Forced by the clearing of the jungle to adapt themselves to a new world, whilst clinging to many of their old tradition, they began to hire out their labour for cash to landlords in this area. In return for their labour a landlord would allow them squatting rights on the waste lands and there they erected their own settlements, dug a well and cultivated their own little subsistence plots.... Instead

⁸ Leonard K Elmhurst, *Poet and Plowman*, Viswa-Bharati Publishing Department, Kolkata, 2008.

of rent the local landlord demanded free labour from them whenever it suited him.” He further observes that “this simple, cheery people have their own legal code and in case of disputes choose arbitrators from among their own community. *They never live close to either a Hindu or a Muslim village or hamlet*, but they are eminently exploitable being illiterate. [Emphasis added, P.76]

This observation of Elmhirst produces the picture of the actual life conditions and belief and legal systems of the Santals. It clearly illustrates that Santals were never part of Hindu or Muslim religious fold. What Nandalal’s representation is attempting here is to produce a picture which takes away all these concrete realities of the Santal life.

This broader background may allow us to understand the significance of Ramkinker’s critical engagement with the primitivist discourse. A detailed analysis of Ramkinker’s deployment of language would explore the way in which he deterritorializes the major languages in order to destabilize the grand narrative of nationalism and its primitivist discourses. In the history of Bengal School Ramkinker possesses a unique position. He is one among the foremost figures who have moved away from the diktats of the oriental aestheticism (or the pastoral naturalism) of Bengal School. It is not to claim that he has completely rejected the contribution of Bengal School. But unlike almost all of the practitioners of his time (Gaganendranath Tagore is another exception) he had deeply engaged with the modernist language of Europe. The Cubist and Expressionist languages have motivated his persuasion for a distinct language which facilitates a minoritarian positioning. Early works of Ramkinker show his mastery over the orientalist pictorial traditions. Significant aspect is that he has never attempted a synthesis of these various linguistic/pictorial traditions. Instead of a pictorial synthesis he had attempted to explore the disruptive potential of these languages by weaving one against the other in order to make possible a creative encounter between them. This politics of disjoiner was possible for him because of his conviction that these traditions should not be counted as styles instead they have to be treated as distinct languages with their own limits, extends and possibilities.

In other words, Ramkinker worked through/across two major pictorial languages but still remained as an outsider to both. The simultaneous act of interweaving and counter-weaving of languages has produced a plurivocal character to his works. I would argue that this character is a product of his minority positioning within these major languages. Here, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s⁹ observations about the features of minor literature may help us to unravel the nuances of his linguistic positioning. Ramkinker Baij spoke in the variants of both of the major languages and still remained as a “foreigner in his own tongue”. [P. 149]¹⁰ Deleuze and Guattari further observe about the three important characteristics of minor literature. These three characteristics would help us to understand the radical character of Ramkinker’s engagement. Deleuze and

⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *The Deleuze Reader*, Constantin V. Boundas (Ed.), Columbia University Press, New York 1993. All citations are from this book. Page numbers are given in brackets.

¹⁰ Deleuze and Guattari has pointed out that “The problem is not the distinction between major and minor language; it is one of becoming. It is a question not of reterritorializing oneself on a dialect or a patois but of deterritorializing the major language.” (Deleuze: 149)

Guattari writes: “A minor literature doesn’t come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language. But the first characteristic of minor literature in any case is that in its language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization.” [p.152]

These characteristics of minor language are evident in Ramkinker’s ability to move away from the impulses of a pictorial synthesis. Instead of a pictorial synthesis, that would be an act of reterritorialization, he has attempted simultaneous interweaving and counterweaving of languages. Through this peculiar pictorial tactics, he has transgressed the logics of stylistic categorization. His works have an aspect of spontaneity (like in the case of Expressionists) as well as they are structural at the same time (like the Cubists). His sculptures for instance are structurally constructional and stable as balanced by axis lines either centralized or distributed but through the peculiar mixture of techniques (like moulding and chiseling)¹¹, the compound of conflicting representational strategies (like figuration and abstraction) and the special emphasis on the tactility of surfaces they overcome the rigidity of all structures. They are objective and subjective at the same time. Or in other words, through this aspect of objectified subjectification and the subjectified objectification, his works capture what Alois Riegl conceptualized as the haptic quality of a work of art.

The second and third characteristic of minor literatures according to Deleuze and Guattari’s conceptualization is also strongly prevalent in his work. According to these thinkers “everything in them [minor literature] is political.” and “in it everything takes on a collective value.” [p.153]. Ramkinker’s voice was not the voice of an isolated human but an appearance of an alienated voice of a collective/community; it was/is invariably social. That is the reason he spoke in various tongues, even contradictory in nature. But this contradiction, ‘two souls in one dark body’, Ramkinker converted as his strength, following Deleuze and Guattari, “that is the strength of authors termed “minor”, who are in fact the greatest, the only greats: having to conquer one’s own language, in other words, to attain that sobriety in the use of a major language, in order to place it in a continuous variation (the opposite to regionalism)” [p.149].

We have already briefly discussed about the political nature and collective value of Ramkinker’s work in the context of *Mill Call* and *Santal Family*. Further in this context I would argue that the moving figures in Ramkinker’s *Mill Call* and *Santal Family* are the representations of beings in the process of becoming. The politics of Ramkinker’s works can be summarized as the politics of becoming. The stormy move of the two Santal women in *Mill Call*, one looks ahead while the other looks backward with a movement and a countermovement, is one of the most significant representation of the relationship between tradition and modernity. These two figures can be read as

¹¹ Janak Jhankar Narzari in his essay ‘Ramkinker Baij – An Assessment’ provides a detailed description of Ramkinker’s modes of making of work of art. He observes that ‘the soft and tender volume and curve lines rendered by hand modeling are combined with knife cut angular planes and straight lines, used simultaneously to suggest the volume as well as to clarify structural planes. The use of such planer forms rendered by knife modeling juxtaposed with volume and curve lines...’ see *Nandan*, ‘Ramkinker Baij Centenary Number ’06, Volume xxvi, 2006, Santiniketan, 2006.

conflicting identities of a community. They are not mere representation of two female figures instead they represent the collective ambition of Santal community in particular and subalterns in general. They are moving against the forces of a storm or else the force and counterforce of their movement is producing a storm: one face turned towards the past another towards the future. This indeterminate space of movement and counter-movement is central to Ramkinker's composition. The politics of the works does not primarily consist in the subject-matter alone but more in the opening of this indeterminate/interstitial space. The invocation of a space and its opening communicates with the possibility of an as yet unqualified excess with regard to power. The storm is the result of the friction between the forces of past and the future. Their floating clothes are metamorphasized as their wings. The child in the sculpture, looking upwards and venturing forward, following the footpaths of the other figures represent the generational matrix of this movement. This work insists on the problematic of space, place and local as well as their irreducibility to a singular field of power. But it is important to mention here that the notions of past and future, tradition and modernity, progress etc. are radically altered in this representation. The movement and countermovement in the representation clearly suggests an ambivalent relation these figures have with these notions. These figures are not moving towards an already existing future (or modernity) or began their journey from an originary past but the friction in the representation is an anticipator of the necessity to alter the course of the very modernity, which is contoured through the upper caste/class logic. Or in other words, the modernity out there is an impossible location to reach and this awareness is what makes the storm-like forward movement and the volcanic countermove. This reminds us of Walter Benjamin's poignant comment on Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*:

...shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past... But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

But unlike Klee's angel, these two santal women in this sculpture represent an ambivalent relationship the subaltern community always had with the nationalist imposition of them as the bearers of a primordial culture. Klee's *Angelus Novus* is a product of Europe's own response to the notion of past and tradition, but it is impossible for an artist as a (post) colonial subject to conceptualize the self in the same fashion. One of the reasons behind evoking Benjamin's readings on Klee painting is that his ruminations around the question of historical materialism may help us to explore the complex character of modernity. Walter Benjamin developed a methodology of historical materialism to critique the "homogeneous, empty time" of rationalized societies and their understanding of history as progress.¹² Benjamin called this understanding "historicism" and argued that it removes attention from the historical present because it reduces history to an instrumental flow that seamlessly advances from barbarism to civilization and from

¹² Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt, 1968), 261.

the primitive to the modern. This narrative reproduces the past – as it flows steadily onwards – and thus helps to reproduce existing power structures and beliefs. For instance, historicism understands racialized societies on the colonial “periphery” as being less than modern because they are dissimilar to (and therefore irrational in comparison with) Western societies. In contrast, Benjamin’s historical materialism does not simply invert this paradigm by privileging the heterogeneity of “primitive” peoples who are “outside” modernity and therefore might yet redeem it. Instead, Benjamin argues that the task of the historian is, as Keya Ganguly puts it, to understand the “collective temporal catastrophe” of both past and present that “betokens the predicament of modernity.”¹³ Benjamin famously summarizes the racial unconscious of modernity that results from this rationalization as: “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”¹⁴ In accounting for this dilemma, histories of both imperial “center” and colonial “periphery” must be taken into account.

Benjamin’s historical materialism – in which civilization and barbarism coexist catastrophically – is crucially important for reclaiming alternative modernisms. This is so precisely because the dialectical tension of historical materialism is not simply a reclamation of the nonsynchronous (the fact that modern and traditional societies exist coevally, a formulation that allows for primitivist, casteist and racist formulations because “the traditional” is still considered anachronistic). Rather, Benjamin believes that historical materialism may yet create a just society by means of “the time filled by the presence of the now.”¹⁵ Historical materialism makes visible the various temporal positions that range from the modern to the primitive within modernity, and potentially allows for “primitive” knowledge and practices to generate alternative modernisms and to reconceptualize modernity itself. This fashioning of alternative modernisms occurs when “the time of the now” appears as scraps of the past and present that might, Benjamin argues, “seize hold of memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger” in order to “wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.”¹⁶ Laura Winkiel in her book *Modernism, Race and Manifestoes* while engaging with Benjamin’s historical materialism observes that “as powerfully suggestive as Benjamin’s historical materialism is, he critiques history from within a European frame of reference. The “other” who lies outside of the totality of history remains excluded (whether marked by gender, sexual, and/or racial differences) from the frame of history.”

Ramkinker’s works definitely shares many of Benjamin’s formulations about the ‘historical materialism’. These works indicate the possibilities of Benjaminian alternative modernisms and at the same time they also depart from Benjamin’s fundamental notions and frames of history. Ramkinker engages with what constitute the ‘outside’ of history; both European as well as the nationalist. The doubly ‘outsided’ subaltern subject is the position and point of enquiry of his works. The Santals in his *Mill Call* are not the

¹³ Keya Ganguly, “Temporality and Postcolonial Critique,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, ed. Neil Lazarus (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 176.

¹⁴ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 256.

¹⁵ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 261.

¹⁶ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 255.

abstract working class of D.P. Roy Chaudhari, they are subjects with conflictual moorings. The female figures does not appear here as the repository of nature, instead they position themselves as originators and the bearers of the storm and a volcanic eruption called counter-modernity. Ramkinker's acute understanding about the nature of the economy of labor is evident in his remark that "(A)re women labourers not the most obvious example of prisoners of a political system?"¹⁷ In short, two Santal women in the *Mill Call* is not moving towards a new form of oppression – from the feudal to the capitalist one – instead they are anticipating "the time of the now"; a "collective temporal catastrophe" of both past and present that "betokens the predicament of modernity.

My argument in this context is that the two figures in this sculptural assemblage do not signify two Santal women. In fact, they represent the inner dynamics of a community, which are in the process of becoming. Metaphorically speaking, there is only one figure in this assemblage but their duality manifest as two identities. It is more than obvious that these figures are not conceptualized as two individuals. The preparatory sketch for this sculpture exemplifies this aspect. This water color sketch shows a mirror like figuration of two female characters. The two figures in that sense is a 'self-portrait' of the artist himself. His own conflictual relationship with the question of tradition, modernity and nationalism is the thematic of this sculptural assemblage. The persona of the artist do not appear here as an authentic genius, rather it appears as an incoherent self, which inflects the course of representation. In this context, I would further argue that the inability to recognize this politics of becoming is the reason behind Mitter's attempts to bracket him as primitivist.

The ideological undercurrents of this bracketing deserve a critical analysis. By bracketing Ramkinker's works under the tag of primitivists, along with the works of Nandalal Bose, Benod Bihari Mukherjee, Rabindranath Tagore and Jamini Roy; Mitter has attempted to present a normalized version of modernism where Ramkinker easily fits as one of the members of the pantheon of Indian modernists. Ramkinker's decision to move away from the dominant style of Bengal School has been described by various scholars merely as a stylistic search/shift. But this decision has various other dimensions too. The cultural capital and symbolic economy possessed by the upper caste/class intelligentsia found their rat holes of hope in reasserting a cultural nationalism/insularism which in turn helps them to regain their cultural hegemony. The cultural hegemony they have possessed traditionally was under threat due to the colonial onslaught. But for a subaltern subject, this option of a coherent subject who owns a privileged 'inner domain' of culture was not an available option. This awareness about the lack of cultural capital is evident in Ramkinker Baij's satirical reflection on joining Kala Bhavana as a student. He states: "it was the Santhiniketan Brahmacharya Vidyalaya. I was astonished. I had wished to go to art school in Calcutta. What was I going to do in the Brahmacharya Vidyalaya?"¹⁸ This reflection reveals the ambivalent relationship subaltern community in general has had regarding the institutional initiatives of the elite class. This apprehension

¹⁷ Devi Prasad, *Ramkinker: A Tribute* Art Heritage 9, 1989-90, Art Heritage, Triveni Kala Sangam, New Delhi, 1990. p.62.

¹⁸ Devi Prasad, *Ramkinker A Tribute*, Art Heritage- 9, 1989-90, Art Heritage, Triveni Kala Sangam, New Delhi, p.57.

of the subaltern communities is derived out of the fact that the ideal of these kinds of initiatives have been founded on traditional social values and order, which in an every day encounter they have experienced as oppressive and discriminatory.¹⁹ It is highly probable that the new generation of subaltern communities might have perceived the colonial educational institutions and their seemingly modern outlook as a relatively more accommodative space. However, after joining Santiniketan, this institution remained as Ramkinker's home for the whole life with a few short breaks. Despite its traditional ambience, the modern outlook of Rabindranath Tagore and his universal ideals might be the source of this shift in perspective. This is not to say that his presence in Santiniketan and the art world was conflict free zones. For instance, Anshuman Das Gupta observes that

Some of his early works were also reproduced in the journal Prabasi, in different names like 'Ramkinker Paramanik' (his family and occupational name for quite some time even after his arrival at Santiniketan). He eventually changed it, perhaps under pressure, for it is said that he used to be ridiculed for its strangeness. He used 'Ramprasad Das' for a picture produced some time in the late 20s. Going by the textual evidence we don't come across the name we know him by, till date; if this were to be a sign it would be one of the necessity for adjustments and adaptations in a still caste-ridden Indian society poised at the moment of change.²⁰

This insightful observation of Anshuman Das Gupta reveals the way in which symbolic capital of surnames operates in the public sphere. While surnames operate as a matter of pride and the marker of superior identity for the upper caste; the same remains as a source of ridicule for the subaltern. Ramkinker's uncertainty towards fixing a 'proper' name for him illustrates micro-level operation of caste economy in Indian polity. Similarly, Ramkinker's 'unconventional' and 'anarchic' life style is generally attributed as the traces of his genius. K.G. Subramanyan describes this character of Ramkinker as "he is probably one of the lone survivors of a lost tribe, the 'Khepa' Bauls or the mad mystic; an artist crazy with his art, lost so much in his search as to forget both his person and his

¹⁹ Leonard K Elmhirst's accounts about his collaborations with Rabindranath Tagore's institutional initiative illustrate the brahminical nature of many practices prevalent in the everyday rituals of Santiniketan and Sriniketan. In his Sreeniketan Dairy he narrates many instances. The Crystal Palace ceremony he has witnessed in November 30, 1921, the recital and singing of "Sanskrit texts (*mantrams*)" were essential part. He also speaks of the charm and great delicacy of Tagore's own recitation of Sanskrit verses. (p.42). On November 28, 1921 he has recorded in his dairy about the greeting custom: "the fashion here when meeting Tagore is to lean down and make as if to touch and 'take the dust from the feet' with one hand as a mode of greeting. The same custom is followed by the children in the school when they meet their teachers." (p.38). Another telling instance he narrates like this: "I ran into Madame Sylvain Levy today. Her keen eye doesn't seem to miss very much of what is going on. 'The trouble is,' she said, 'they are all just too nice here in Santiniketan, and life has really become too easy for them. They have depended upon servants for so long that neither masters nor slaves have retained much of their own independence. The students too are too polite. At home (at the Sorbonne) my husband's best students are accustomed to disagree with them. Here they never raise a question. If someone here stood up and disagreed with Gurudev the world would come to an end, in spite of his real greatness'" {January 19, 1922] (p.69)

²⁰ Anshuman Das Gupta, "Centrifuge: Visual metaphors for the Modernist Moment", in the catalogue, *Ramkinker Baij Centenary Exhibition – 2006-07*, Nandan, Kala Bhavan, Santiniketan, p.6.

product, not concerned in the least whether it brought him fame or success.”²¹ He also distinguishes Ramkinker from the usual characterization of artist-bohemian and states that “this unconcern of his is so unlike the cultivated unconcern of the usual artist-bohemian, who wears tears in his trousers and holes in his pockets and live an ostentatiously disheveled life; the most moving fact about Kinkar-babu is that there is not even a grain of affection in him.” Contrary to this observation, Anshuman cites a sociologist’s reading on Ramkinker;

...a famous sociologist is said to have referred to him as a case of regressive mobility. According to him, Ramkinker, who left his rather lowly life behind to rise to the tope of the art world and a world of recognition, falls back on the pattern of life he left behind, perhaps due to his disillusionment at the complexity of the life he encountered in the elite and sophisticated ambience.²²

The distinction K.G. Subramanyan makes between the usual artist- bohemian and the Khepa Baul figure or the ‘regressive mobility’ theory of the sociologist is not sufficient to understand the complex subject location of Ramkinker Baij. Subramanyan attributes the ‘absolute absence of affection’ in Ramkinker Baij into the quasi-mystic figuration of the Khepa Baul. Such kind of transfers serves hegemonic discourses. Discursive frameworks of this kind, through the romantic idealization, evades the crucial questions regarding the central roles social categories such as caste, class, gender, ethnicity etc play in the subjective formation and their performative matrix in the every day. On the other hand, the concept of ‘regressive mobility’ is based on a stereotypical understanding about social mobility. It is conceptualized as a personal psychological fall back due to the disillusionment caused through the encounter with the sophisticated ambience of the elite world. It assumes and implicates that subaltern has an implicit desire for a lowly life. They unconsciously desire for it whence a difficult life situation encounters them. Like in the case of conventional psychological accounts, the aspects of the social and historical are sidelined and everything has reduced into the realm of the personal alone. Such kinds of conceptions are inherently hegemonic in character and reproduce the existing power structures and popular perceptions.

The concept that Gilroy proposes as a means of representing the structure of Black Atlanticism – is that of “double consciousness” – will be useful for understanding the subjective complexities of subalterns in general. This concept derives from the work of W.E.B. Du Bois, who opened *The Soul of Black Folk* with the observation that “one ever feels his twoness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” [quoted in Black Atlantic, p. 126]. Du Bois’s purpose in mobilizing the concept of “double consciousness” was “to convey the special difficulties arising from black internationalism of an American identity” [Gilroy, p.126]; but Gilroy wishes to generalize its applicability, according to its authoritative status with

²¹ K.G. Subramanyan, “An Artist Crazy with His Art”, in Nandan, An annual on Art and aesthetics, volume XXVI, 2006, Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan, p.3

²² Anshuman Das Gupta, “Centrifuge: Visual metaphors for the Modernist Moment”, in the catalogue, Ramkinker Baij Centenary Exhibition – 2006-07, Nandan, Kala Bhavan, Santhiniketan, p.8.

respect to black Western subjectivity. Gilroy's conception of "Double consciousness" serves us to profile a form of subaltern subjectivity that – despite the fact that it is quintessentially modern – cannot be accommodated with the logic of modernity's master narrative. It cannot be clothed "without reminder" in the official uniform of modernity, whose normalizing lines and contours were/are, after all, explicitly and quietly self-consciously fashioned with its exclusion in mind. Ramkinker's initial uncertainty about the name and surname to the absolute absence of affection can be better understood through the framework of double consciousness.

The double consciousness or the indeterminate subjective location is the thematic of his 'Mill Call'. As I have already mentioned, his works insist on the problematic of space, place and local as well as their irreducibility to a singular field of power. The recurring presence of movement and counter-movement in his works certainly point towards this aspect of the 'double'.²³ What makes Ramkinker's engagement with the Santal community certainly distinct from other early modernist practitioners is his awareness about his own subalternity. In terms of representational politics as well as the everyday, this awareness of awareness (the double, the second degree) is his source and his torment.

²³ His works like *Untitled* (sculpture plaster cast of 1930's), *Lamp Stand* (direct concrete, 1940) *Thresher* (direct cement, 1943), *Speed* (plaster, 1953) and many other paintings like *In the Hills of Arakan* (oil on canvas, 1963) along with many other similar works exemplify this observation.